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English identity and the governance of England



About Governing England

Governing England is a multi-disciplinary programme which seeks to address a number of issues concerning the government and governance of England.

The project is a two-year programme being overseen by the British Academy public policy team. It is exploring the developing constitutional and governance settlement in England, how citizens relate to their institutions, what changing devolution settlements in England may mean for the future of the Union, and how English identity is evolving.

To conclude the programme the Academy will publish 'Governing England: Understanding English institutions and identity in a devolving UK' in July 2018. This book will be co-authored by some of the UK's leading academics and commentators. It will set out the context for the current devolution settlement in England against a backdrop of previous attempts at local government reorganisation, changing political sentiment, and potential implications for the future of the UK.

Themes of the programme:

- England in the UK Parliament
- Whitehall as government of England and the UK
- England in a changing fiscal union
- English regions, city regions and mayors
- The future of the political parties
- England and the English

The British Academy has, through a series of roundtables, engaged with representatives of the new combined authorities, council leaders, academics, journalists, business and trades union representatives, MPs, Peers and civil servants. We are disseminating our findings with government, and through this work hope to better inform the development of this policy area and ensure crucial public policy questions in this arena are adequately addressed. Roundtables were held as part of this series of work in Newcastle upon Tyne, Sheffield, Bristol, Winchester and Cambridge.

The project is co-chaired by Professor Iain McLean FBA FRSE and Professor Michael Kenny. Members of the working group include Professor John Curtice FBA FRSE FRSA, Professor Jim Gallagher, Professor Meg Russell, Rt Hon Professor John Denham and Guy Lodge.

FOREWORD

This paper has been produced as part of the British Academy public policy project ‘Governing England’, and is generously supported by the Carnegie UK Trust.

An element of the programme focuses on English identity; this paper explores recent demographic trends and developments in the views of people in England on being English or British, and explores elements of the evidence to show how identity is changing over time.

The paper has been produced as a provocation paper ahead of the British Academy Governing England conference ‘Devolution and Identity in England’ in July 2017.

Further work to examine changing attitudes towards identity in England will take place in the second half of this programme throughout 2017/18.

INTRODUCTION

A good place to start discussion of England’s governance is with the aspirations of the English people. But understanding what the English people want or believe is not as simple as it may sound.

The views of the English people might include all the people of England, those who identify in some way as English, or those who identify most strongly or exclusively as English.

In a democracy, the ‘English people’ must include all those entitled to vote in England. In recent years, several studies have suggested that ‘English’ identity has become more assertive at the expense of ‘British’ identity. There is some evidence of significant differences in values and attitudes amongst English and British identifiers. Some surveys show correlations between national identity and political behaviour, including views on England’s governance.

This short paper summarises some of what we know, and what we don’t, about these different identities of the English people.

SURVEYS, AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

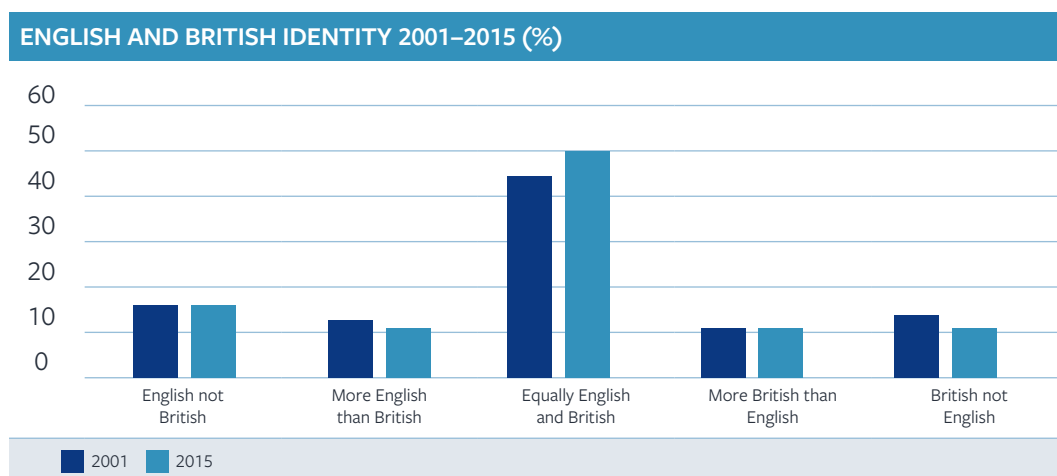
Most of our data comes from surveys that ask about national identity and a range of demographic, political and value questions.¹ A discussion of the different methodologies is beyond the scope of this paper, but three points should be noted:

- Survey results are quite volatile over relatively short periods of time and between different surveys. It is not clear whether these are real changes or a product of methodology. Here we have aimed to highlight broad trends.
- Different survey questions produce apparently different or contradictory outcomes. For example, surveys that offer a choice of identities typically show higher numbers of English identifiers than those that ask respondents to place themselves on a scale of identities from ‘English not British’ through to ‘British not English’.² Questions about the strength of feeling a particular identity produces different results again. We have aimed to use the most relevant question for the issue we are exploring.
- Not all interesting questions have been asked consistently over time, or in all surveys, so it can be hard to know what is a new development and what has been constant, or to study all issues against the same identity questions.
- None of these surveys include the other identities – town, region, ethnicity, faith – that individuals may hold, nor how important they are in relation to national identity.

Perhaps most importantly, survey data provides little understanding of the ideas of England that people have in mind when saying they are English. A national identity may be an imagined community, but we cannot be sure that we all share the same stories about what that is. There is a similar lack of clarity about British identity: taken to be interchangeable with Englishness by some, a distinct identity for others (although we do not know how an individual might distinguish between the two) and also offering the possibility of a purely legal citizenship. A future overview paper might bring together studies of identity and narratives in different communities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Englishness (and Britishness) today.

ENGLISH, BRITISH, OR BOTH?

Over the past 15 years, the most widely held identity in England has been ‘equally English and British’, according to some well-known surveys, with the great majority of English residents expressing some English and some British identity.



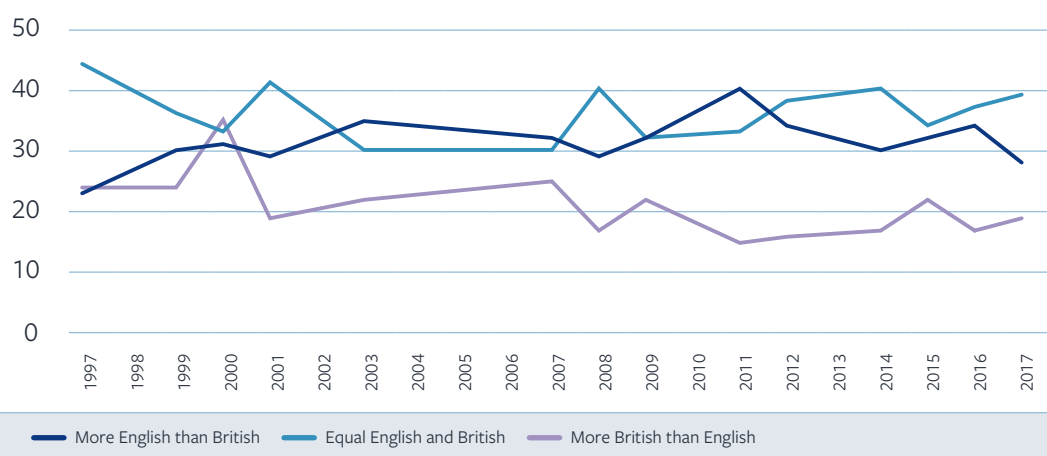
¹ We have drawn primarily from the British Election Study (2001, 2015, and the EU referendum), British Social Attitudes Survey, NatCen studies, the Future of England Survey and surveys commissioned by the Centre for English Identity and Politics.

² In this paper ‘more English’ refers to the sum of ‘English not British’ and ‘more English than British’ and ‘more British’ to the obverse.

It is less clear how the ‘more English’ and ‘more British’ identities have developed. Comparison of the 2001 and 2015 BES shows only a small shift towards the ‘English’ end of the spectrum. Other surveys (FES, YouGov) have shown a more marked move toward ‘more English’ identities, with some showing 50% more people identifying as ‘more English’ than ‘more British’, and this disparity increasing in recent years.

Over a longer period, a pattern appears to have become established for equal English and British to be the most widely held identity and ‘more English’ becoming more popular than ‘more British’.

MORENO SCALE 1997 – 2017 (%)



AGE

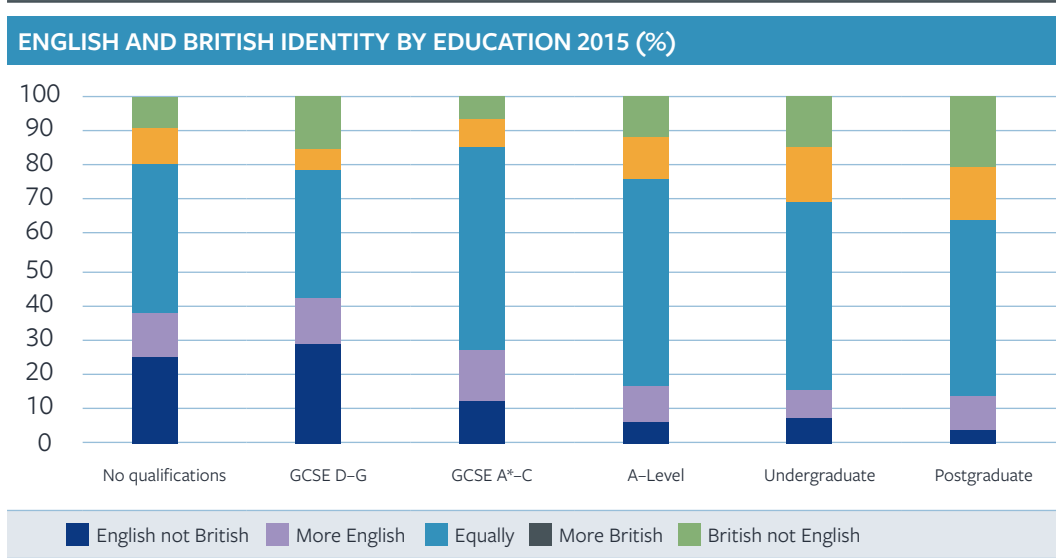
At all ages, ‘equally English and British’ is the most widely held identity. It is only amongst the over 65s that ‘English’ and ‘more English’ significantly exceeds ‘British’ and ‘more British’. At other ages, these identities are chosen by similar numbers of people. The patterns in 2001 and 2015 were similar, suggesting that this is a function of ageing, rather than simply of a cohort growing older.

Younger people are as likely to identify as ‘English’ (to some degree but not exclusively) but less likely to say they feel very strongly English. Older people are also more likely to feel ‘strongly British’ but to a lesser extent. It appears that strength of national identity is related to age, with English identity being the most strongly held.

EDUCATION

The likelihood of identifying as ‘more English’, and feeling ‘very strongly’ English, is correlated with education. Those with the lowest levels of educational qualifications are more likely to identify as ‘English’ rather than ‘British’ and to report the strongest intensity of Englishness. Those with higher education qualifications are more likely to report themselves as holding a more ‘British’ identity.

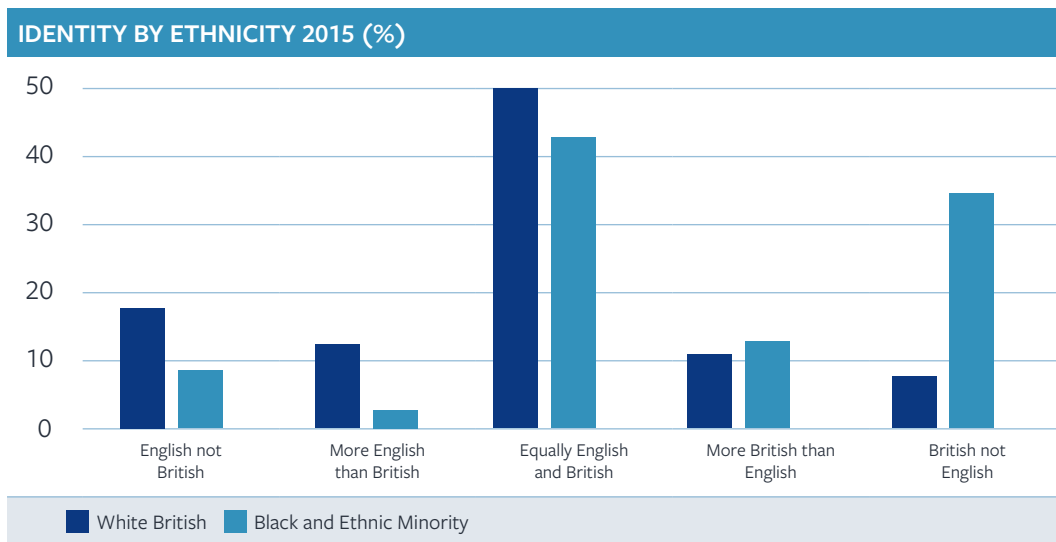
As with age, it is important to make a distinction between expressing some degree of English identity, feeling identity very strongly, and identifying exclusively as ‘English’. Over 60% of those with postgraduate qualifications identify as either ‘equally English and British’, or ‘more English’, but only 4% identify as ‘English not British’ compared with 25% of those with no qualifications.



ETHNICITY

Like white voters, BAME voters are more likely to identify as ‘equally English and British’ than any other identity on the Moreno scale³, but are much more likely to be ‘British not English’, than ‘English not British’.

BAME voters are also much more likely to say they feel not at all English and much less likely to feel very strongly English.

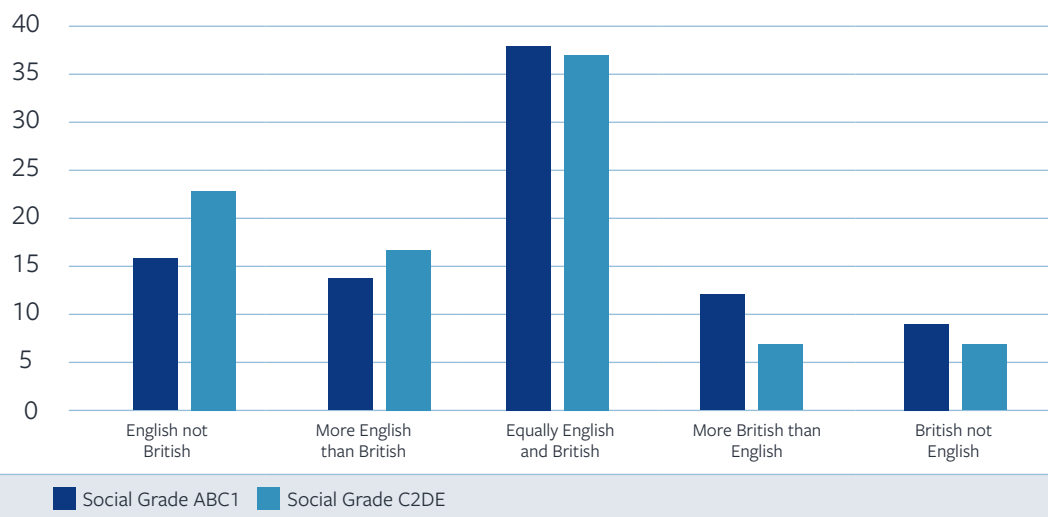


³ Luis Moreno Fernandez is a journalist, sociologist, and political scientist, he is Research Professor at the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC). In 1986 he introduced in the Anglo-Saxon academic world what is known as ‘the Moreno Question’, by which a self-identification scale expressed by citizens in Scotland was meant to clarify social mobilization in the quest for political autonomy (‘Only Scottish, not British’; ‘More Scottish than British’; ‘Equally Scottish as British’; ‘More British than Scottish’; and ‘Only British, not Scottish’).

SOCIAL CLASS

There is some correlation between social class and identity, although middle class (ABC1) voters are, like working class voters (C2DE), also more likely to be ‘more English’ than ‘more British’.

IDENTITY BY SOCIAL CLASS 2015 (%)



THE REGIONAL DIMENSION

We do not know whether, as is sometimes held, regional English identities (Yorkshire, Geordie and so on) are held more strongly than ‘Englishness’ or ‘Britishness’. There are some regional variations in the pattern of ‘English’ and ‘British’ identities but the most marked difference is in London, which is significantly more ‘British’. However, the ‘white British’ in London have a similar pattern of identities to other English regions, so the difference may largely reflect the size of the BAME population in London.

IDENTITY, INTENSITY AND PATRIOTISM

It is not just national identity that matters, but how strongly it is felt. In 2016, 49% of BES⁴ respondents identified not just as ‘English’, but at the strongest level of feeling ‘English’ (7 on a scale of 0-7). Just over 40% of respondents expressed a similar strength of ‘Britishness’, giving some evidence that Englishness may be a more strongly felt identity.

However, those who feel most strongly ‘English’ are also very often those who feel most strongly ‘British’; they are patriotic about both their identities. But this does not mean that Englishness and Britishness are just two faces of the same patriotism: beliefs, values and behaviours can vary significantly.

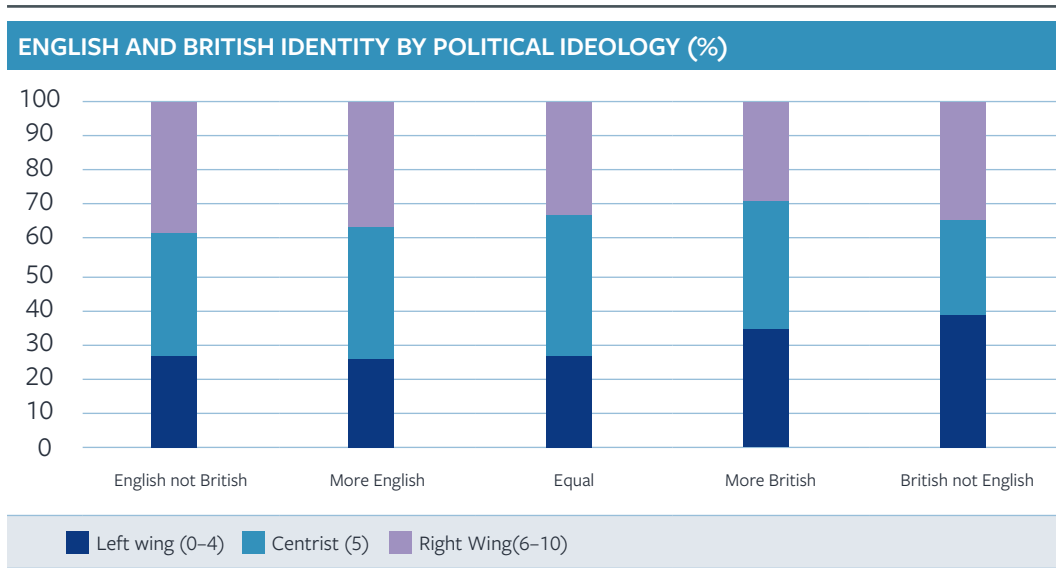
WHAT THE ENGLISH BELIEVE

Having looked at which people might feel English, we can examine some of their values and political views.

Left or Right?

There is only a limited relationship between national identity (on the Moreno scale) and where voters put themselves on a left right scale. ‘More English’ voters are more likely to see themselves as right wing, although the strength of this relationship declined between 2001 and 2015. Nonetheless, the majority of ‘English not British’ voters are more likely to describe themselves as centrist, or left wing, than right wing.

⁴ <http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/>

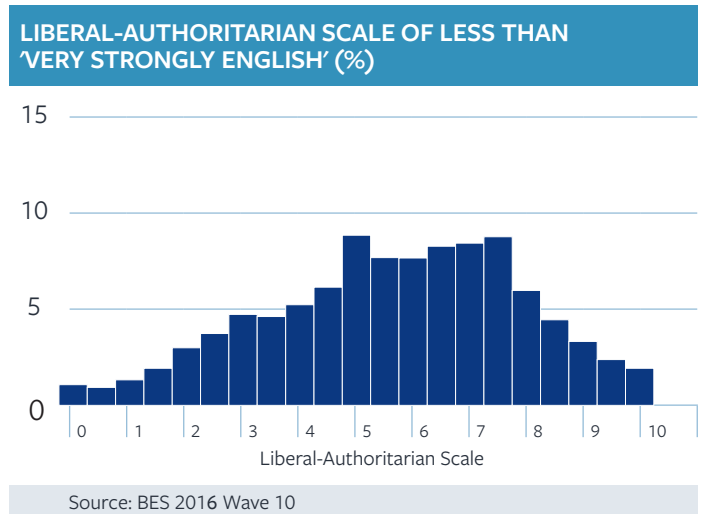
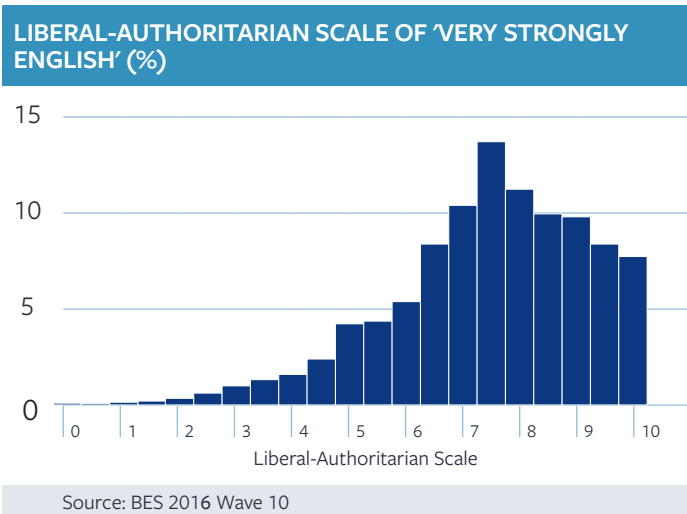


On social policy?

Nor was there a strong correlation between reported identity and views on social policy issues such as the NHS, education and crime in either 2001 or 2015. For example, there was little variation on whether there should be more effort for redistribution, or whether it is important that more money is put into the NHS, across the range of identities from ‘English only’ to ‘British only’. This was consistent in both the British Election Study and the British Social Attitudes Survey.

Liberal or authoritarian?

The BES asks questions that are taken to indicate where people lie on a scale from ‘libertarian’ to ‘authoritarian’. The liberal-authoritarian scale is constructed out of five items which require ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’ responses to questions such as “for some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence”. Those who feel ‘very strongly English’ have more authoritarian attitudes than the general population on average. The graphs below contrast the values of those who say they are ‘very strongly English’ and everyone else.



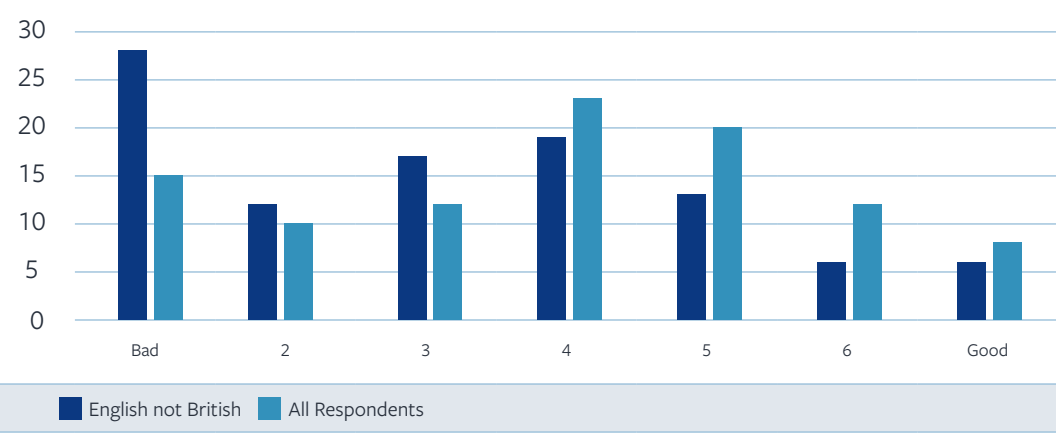
Populist?

Donald Trump, Brexit, and the rise of insurgent parties in Europe have led some commentators to equate national identity and populist politics. Populist attitudes can be tested by propositions such as ‘the people should make important policy, not politicians’. There is generally a weak correlation between support for populist values and intensity of English identity. However, while the majority of people at all levels of intensity of feeling English support the proposition that ‘politicians should follow the will of the people’, it is those who feel most intensely English who give it significantly stronger support.

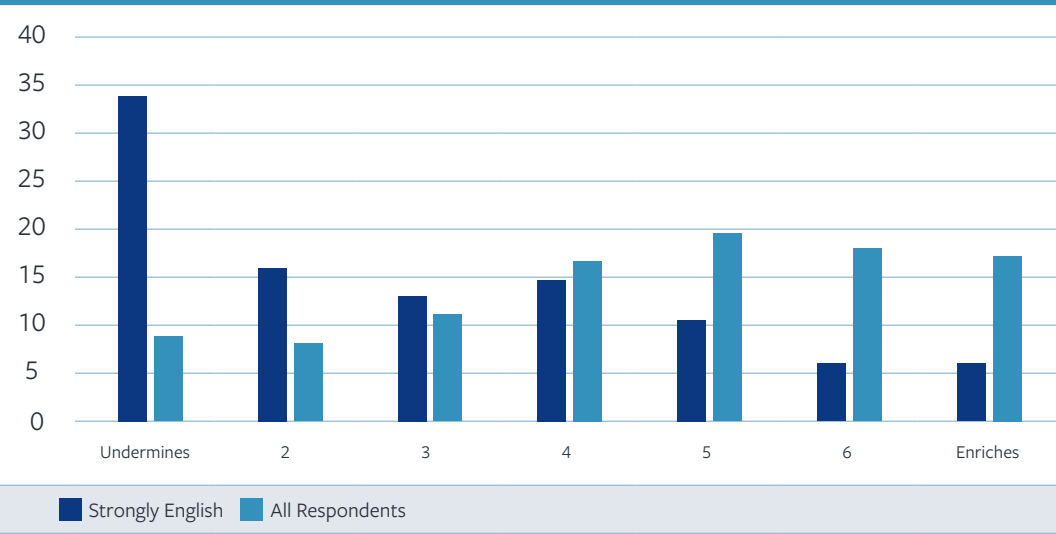
On migration?

Most English residents (78%) believe that immigration is too high, but this rises to 90% for the ‘English not British’, and they are more likely to say that immigration is bad for the economy. Although the survey questions are not comparable, attitudes of the population in general towards the economic impact of migration hardened between 2001 and 2015, and most amongst the ‘English not British’

IMMIGRATION IS BAD OR GOOD FOR THE ECONOMY (%)



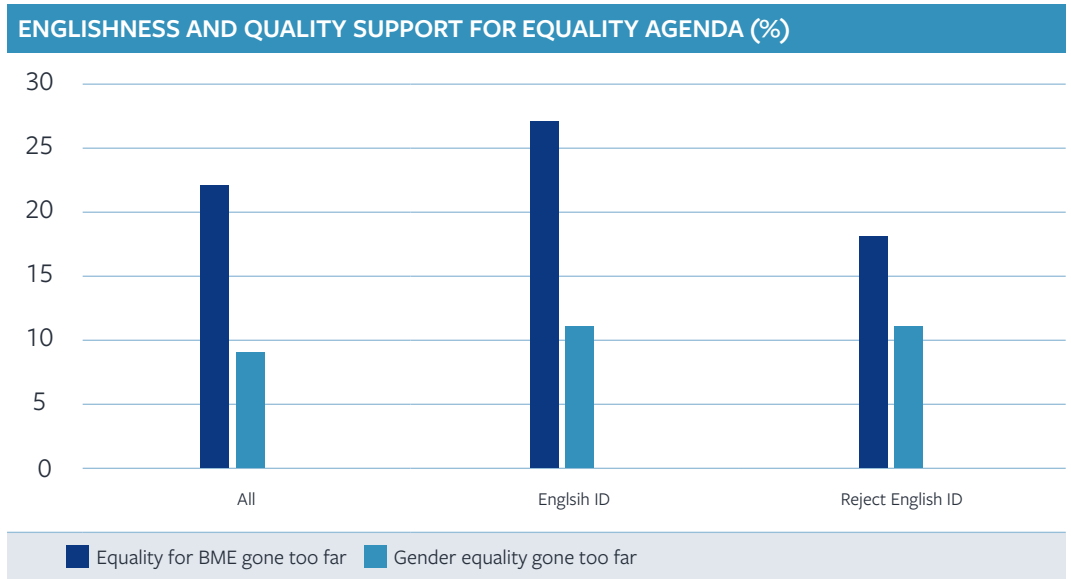
IMMIGRATION UNDERMINES OR ENRICHES CULTURAL LIFE (%)



Those who feel most strongly ‘English’ have ambivalent views on the economic impact of migration, but are much more likely than the wider population to believe that immigration undermines cultural life.

On ethnicity, diversity and equality

The ‘English not British’ have similar attitudes on gender equality to those born in the UK who choose ‘British not English’. But those who identify as English are much more likely than others to say that equality for BAME communities has gone too far. Though this difference is significant (27% to 18%), it is still a minority rather than a majority attitude amongst the ‘English not British’.



Who can be English?

Well over 80% of survey respondents agreed that to be counted as English, people need to pay their taxes here, ‘contribute to society’ and consider themselves English. Around three in four think that an important factor is whether they were born in England. However, the English are more divided on whether to include in their ranks non-whites and the children of immigrants. 56% say it is very or fairly important that their parents were born in England, while 41% regard it as not very, or not at all, important. Just 22% say it is very or fairly important that someone is white if they are to be regarded as truly English (though about the same number say it is ‘not very important’, suggesting some limited ethnic element). Young people are much less likely to see race as important to English identity than older people.

Around three-quarters will see an English-born, non-white person, with a local accent, as English, but this falls to 45% for non-white people in general. Contrary to popular belief, there is some evidence that English people are slightly more accepting of non-white national identity than Scottish people.

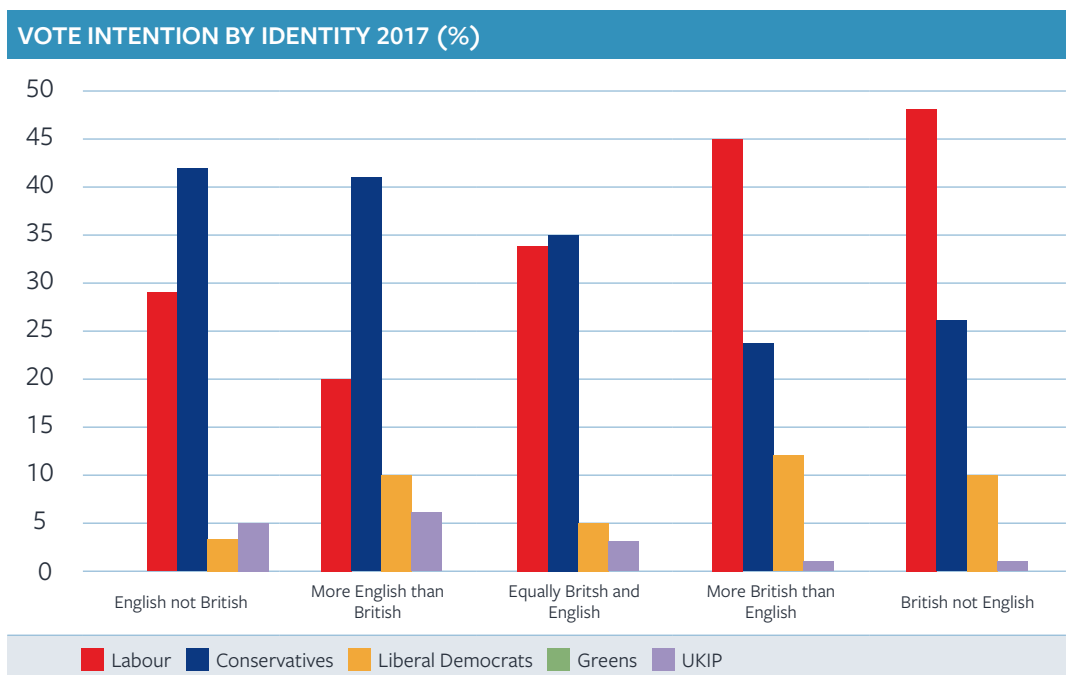
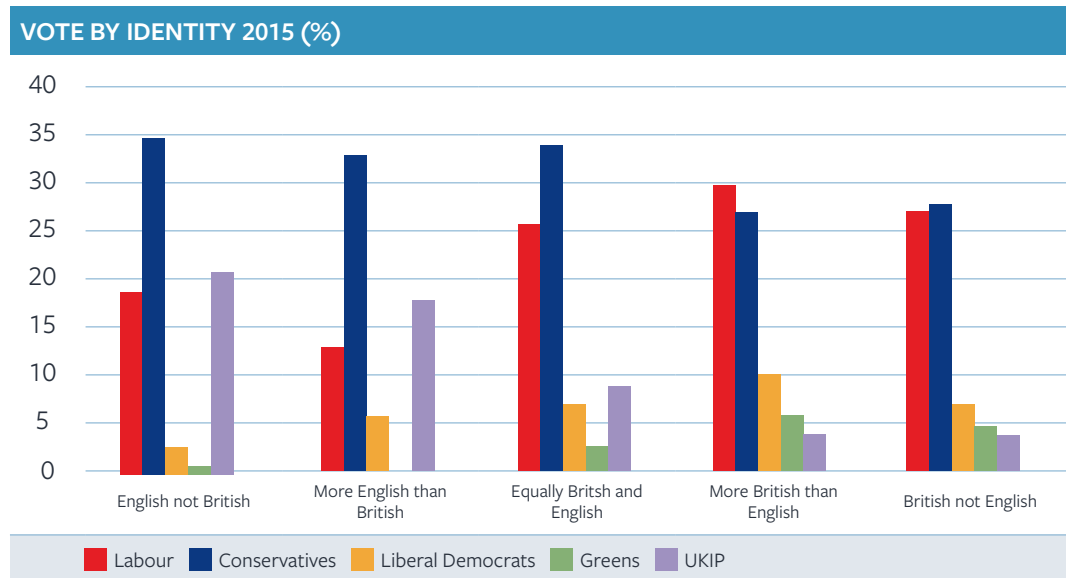
A question for the future is whether the ethnic dimension to English identity remains strong or whether, with a growing English-born BAME population, the issue will fade. Past, white, migration from other parts of the UK has led to the widespread adoption of English identity. While those with English surnames are more to identify as English, those with those with Welsh, Scottish and Irish surnames are also more likely to identify as ‘more English’ than ‘more British’.

THE POLITICAL CHOICES OF THE ENGLISH

General Elections

Between 2001 and 2015 there was a marked change in the relationship between national identity and choice of party. In 2001, the likelihood of voting Labour did not vary significantly across the range of English/British identities, and the propensity to vote Conservative was only slightly greater amongst the more English voters.

By 2015, when UKIP was a significant force, the more ‘English’ voters were much more likely to vote to the right, with Labour and the Liberal Democrats polling most strongly at the ‘British’ end of the spectrum. In 2017, the Conservatives again drew more support from the more ‘English’ than the more ‘British’. However, Labour increased its share of the ‘English’ vote, presumably as some UKIP voters returned to Labour. This may suggest that, in line with voters’ view of their own political position, there is not a simple relationship between identity and left-right voting.

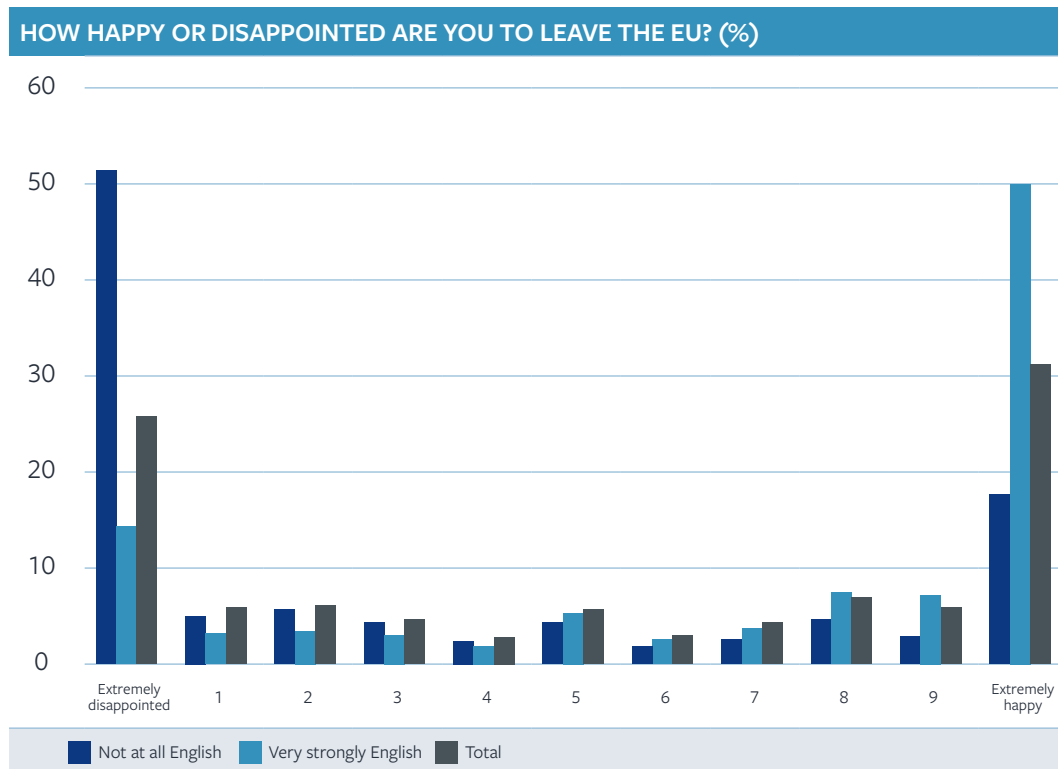
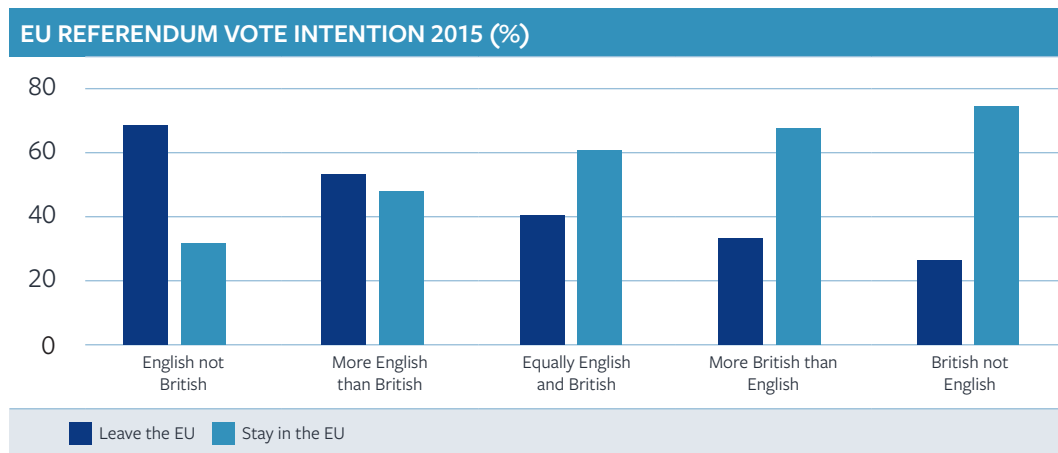


Interestingly, those who feel most strongly ‘English’ were far more likely to see the Labour Party as a far-left party than all other voters (who tend to identify Labour as a centre-left party). This perception is not mirrored for the Conservative party where the ‘most strongly English’ were only slightly more likely to place the party outside the centre right.

Brexit

Early indications in 2017 are that the EU referendum showed similar polarisation, with the ‘more English’ voters heavily backing Leave and the ‘more British’ tending to back Remain.

Not surprisingly, those who felt most intensely ‘English’ are the happiest about leaving the EU and those who feel least intensely ‘English’ the most disappointed, and views are starkly polarised.



Members of political parties

While most English Conservative activists are unionists, three-quarters believe that devolution has been harmful for England. Nearly a third think break-up would 'end unreasonable demands' on England - slightly more than those who believe the loss of Scotland would do serious harm to the rest of the UK. The activists who feel predominantly 'English' are most sceptical about the Union; the 'British' are much less so.

Labour members in England feel more 'British', and much less 'English' than voters as a whole. Party members are half as likely to be 'English not British', and twice as likely to be 'British not English' than the public at large. The profile of Labour members in England is more similar to its voters than to the wider electorate.

THE GOVERNANCE OF ENGLAND

English voters' views on how England should be governed have been relatively stable for over ten years (and do not appear to be significantly influenced by events like the Scottish referendum). Around 60% think England should be governed by the UK Parliament (but with the very important caveat that the majority also think that only English MPs should be able to vote on English legislation – English Votes for English Laws). About one in five would support a separate English Parliament and a similar number regional assemblies.

National identity seems to influence views on governance. In the Future of England Survey (2014) four in ten voters in England thought that Scotland gets too much money, with three in ten believing it is about right. Voters who identify as 'English' are twice as likely to perceive unfairness as those who identify as 'British'. The same voters are twice as likely to support an English Parliament and are less likely to want England to be governed by the UK Parliament.

Of recent and potential constitutional changes, English Votes for English Laws attracts the most support, with only limited backing for regional devolution or an English Parliament. Most surveys do not ask what powers should be held where, nor for voters' attitudes towards the emerging city-regions and combined authorities. English people tell surveys that they both want consistent levels of public service provision everywhere, and more decisions to be taken closer to where they live.

CAUSE, CONSEQUENCE, COINCIDENCE OR CHOICE?

We have not attempted to explain why the people of England hold the identities, values and views that are summarised here. We can conjecture that a number of different processes may be at work

- Some of the behaviours that correlate with identity also correlate with age, education and ethnicity. We cannot be sure which are the most important causal links driving, for example, political choices
- A national identity may be a way of describing a strong collective identity – ‘people like us’. A variety of factors including devolution, migration, the loss of the symbols of empire and the EU may lie behind the intensity and nature of national identities
- There may be more than one understanding of each national identity. ‘Britishness’, for example, may be the source of intense national pride and patriotism for some; an undemanding statement of citizenship for others.
- In a society where multiple identities are common, people may also choose to reject, adopt or prioritise a national identity because they associate it with certain values and attitudes
- Most English residents identify as both ‘English’ and ‘British’ to some degree, with ‘equally English and British’ being the most common identity. Those who feel most intensely ‘English’ are often those who also feel most intensely ‘British’. Some may see these as distinct and complementary identities; others may see them as interchangeable.

Some final thoughts on English identity:

- Commonly held stereotypes of national identity do not reflect the diversity that exists. There are a significant number of English identifiers who see ‘Englishness’ as right wing, ethnic, racialized and anti-migrant but these are not the majority. Those who identify as ‘British’ have been more likely to vote to the centre and left and support the EU, but these attitudes do not define ‘Britishness’.
- Differences in values between those who identify as ‘English’ and those who identify as ‘British’ do seem more marked around issues of race, migration and governance than on questions of social policy, where people identify themselves on a ‘left-right’ axis or their support for populist attitudes.
- Looking to the future, ‘Englishness’ is clearly associated with birth and upbringing. We do not yet know how much ‘Englishness’ will become an identity of choice for the children and grandchildren of migrants, although this has happened in the past. Nor do we know whether the association between identity and age, education and social class will change in the future.

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